



**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**

October 3, 2022

Dr. Kilolo Kijakazi  
Acting Commissioner  
Social Security Administration  
6401 Security Boulevard  
Baltimore, MD 21235

Dear Acting Commissioner Kijakazi:

We write to request an update on the Social Security Administration's (SSA) efforts to improve and expedite processing of Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) applications and appeals, including appeals of continuing disability reviews (CDRs).

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a significant challenge for Federal agencies, and we applaud SSA's unprecedented efforts to prioritize employee safety and adapt to a new working environment. The pandemic struck when SSA was already struggling to provide adequate customer service due to many years of underfunding of agency operations. Since 2010, the number of beneficiaries increased by more than 20 percent while over the same period, SSA's operating budget fell by more than 14 percent, after adjusting for inflation.<sup>1</sup>

From the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the backlog of pending cases at state agencies have increased exponentially. State agencies, which follow federal guidelines and are federally funded, make the initial determination of whether applicants meet the disability standard. Initial decision times often exceed the stated three-to-five-month average<sup>2</sup> and benefit denials due to processing errors are far too common. We understand that these delays are related to SSA's inadequate funding and fully support increasing the agency's resources. However, in the interim, it's critical that you use every tool available to improve service and reduce delays.

In 2021, over 9 million people received Social Security disability benefits.<sup>3</sup> According to the National Academy of Social Insurance, over half of all beneficiaries rely on Disability Insurance

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<sup>1</sup> "Social Security Subcommittee Hearing on Strengthening Social Security's Customer Service." *Ways and Means Committee - Democrats*, 17 May 2022.

<sup>2</sup> "What You Should Know before You Apply for Social Security Disability..." *Social Security Administration*.

<sup>3</sup> Board of Trustees "The 2021 Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance and Federal Disability Insurance Trust Funds." *Social Security Administration*.

and Supplemental Security for 90% percent or more of their income.<sup>4</sup> People rely on their benefits for groceries, housing, medicine, and many other essential expenses. Denials and the cumbersome appeals process immediately upends and disproportionately affects people with disabilities. Benefits are interrupted following the denial and often remain paused until a review—which can take anywhere from 14 to 22 months—is complete.


People left without their benefits following a CDR are forced to navigate an overcomplicated and inaccessible system with inadequate support. A recent SSA Inspector General report found that nearly half of the 151 million callers to field offices and the national 800-number went unanswered.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, SSA must provide information on how to navigate services – including appeals of benefit denials – in formats that are appropriate for the specific needs of the individuals with disabilities such as audio versions, large print and braille options, and easy-to-read information. Lacking multiple formats to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities is discriminatory and immediately places them at a disadvantage.

Denials due to improper processing, inaccessible documents, and unanswered phone calls are cruel and unacceptable. It is imperative that we improve and expedite the current processes for SSDI and SSI benefits. We ask that you provide us with a briefing within 60 days and a written update on the following:

- (1) What steps is SSA taking to ensure that timely and accurate decisions are provided to people applying for disability benefits and to beneficiaries going through a review? When will these changes be announced and take effect?
- (2) What steps is SSA taking to ensure that information on how to apply for benefits, how to appeal benefit denials, and how to continue benefits while appealing a CDR is provided in a range of accessible formats that meet the needs of people with disabilities?
- (3) What additional resources does SSA need to ensure the timeliness, accuracy, and accessibility of its disability determination, appeals, and CDR benefit continuation processes?

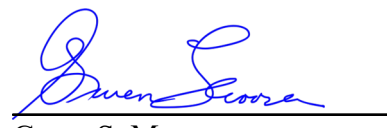
We appreciate your attention to this important issue and look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,



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Joe Neguse  
Member of Congress



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Gwen S. Moore  
Member of Congress

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<sup>4</sup> Fremstad, Shawn, and Rebecca Vallas. “The Facts on Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income for Workers with Disabilities.” *Center for American Progress*, 3 May 2013; National Academy of Social Insurance “Social Security Benefits, Finances, and Policy Options: A Primer.” December 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Inspector General Gail S. Ennis. “Fiscal Year 2021 Inspector General’s Statement on the Social Security Administration’s Major Management and Performance Challenges.” *Social Security Administration*. 10 November 2021.



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Jason Crow  
Member of Congress



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Diana DeGette  
Member of Congress



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Ed Perlmutter  
Member of Congress



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Daniel T. Kildee  
Member of Congress